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ABSTRACT

The contention that among black people there is a cognitive style which seems to require a more active intervention with the learning environment than what is needed by their white counterpart is advanced in this discussion of cognitive style among black Africans and black Americans. Cognitive styles of blacks in the infant, early school, and young adulthood life stages are described. In the infant stage, birth to 36 months, the African babies experience a parenting style of socially active intimacy which appears to promote sensorimotor development superior to that of European infants. The relationship between teaching strategies and black children's cognitive modes are discussed in the light of these cognitive style differences. The decline of academic achievement of black elementary and secondary school students is analyzed. Childrearing practices in America are described for lower socioeconomic groups. The active display of cognitive and motoric domains of black athletes are described. It is suggested that the "active stream of cognition" of young black adults has not been fully tapped by education planners. Also, implications for social change which can emerge from a theory of group differentiated sensorimotor development such as the one suggested by this paper are suggested for the areas of parenting, schooling, therapy, space, and natural groupings (peer group interaction). (Author/JP)

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Towards a Theory of Selected Knowledge Acquisition Patterns Among Black Children

Harry Morgan

Cognitive style variations have attracted the attention of psychologists and educators since the introduction of the field dependence-independence concept approximately 25 years ago.

The general notion of cognitive styling suggests that there are individual differences among people in cognitive patterns related to judging, thinking, perceiving and remembering. Psychologists are interested primarily in the relationship between the learning environment and the learner, and the impact that personality might have upon this encounter. Educators have been concerned about the cognitive style of the teacher and how compatible they might be with cognitive styles demonstrated by school children.

The concerns of psychologists and educators often overlap because they are frequently the same persons--so, the aforementioned separate concerns are not as neatly compartmentalized as they might seem. In general, researchers in this area are concerned about how cognitive style might impact upon one's intellectual and academic competence. Presently, there are approximately 9 different constructs of cognitive styling. The most frequently mentioned, and historically the earliest, is the field dependence-independence. The Preschool Embedded Figures Test (PEFT), is designed to measure in children their ability to separate an object from the field in which it is embedded. It is assumed that the field-independent child is better able to overcome complex situations in which an item is confused with the general field or ground. A second popular construct is the cognitive style of reflection-impulsivity. The test for this construct measures the child's habitual speed of decision making in situations that allow for simultaneous and other likely response choices. One test for children is a visual matching construct called the Matching Familiar Figures Test (MFF). In this test a child is shown a standard stimulus and six similar ones and must select the picture from among the six alternatives which is identical to the standard. Variables scored are latency to first response and the number of errors.

Recently, some researchers have argued that field-independent and reflective cognitive styles are quite the same because they both require systematic scanning and comparisons.

I mention these two styles, not as representative of the research activity on this lively subject, but rather, to set the stage for the introduction of a cognitive style which seems prevalent among American Black people and some other persons of African descent.

Among Black people there is a cognitive style which seems to require a more active interaction with the learning environment than what is needed by their white counterparts. This cognitive style has displays at particular intervals along the life span. I wish to bring a few of these displays to your attention--one from birth to 36 months, another from pre-school to grade 3, and the last one during young adulthood. There has been much speculation among my colleagues concerning the relative contributions of genetics and culture to the advanced sensorimotor development among blacks. It is my view that given the proper atmosphere such questions should be studied. This paper, however, will not address basic etiological issues.

TThe first display along the black life span that I wish to bring to your attention begins with Marcelle Geber's (1960) early reports of advanced development in African neonates, during her observations of mothers and their babies in rural Ugandan communities. A major aspect of her discovery pointed out a parenting style of socially active intimacy. For a period of approximately 36 months this interaction seemed to promote a sensorimotor development superior to similar development in European infants.

As Geber's involvement became more intense she was able to explore some causative factors. She identified a high level of social interaction between the child and his environment. Breast feeding was the common practice and this occurred whenever the infant demonstrated a wish for it. Infants were encouraged to interact with other family members and visitors. They were never confined to cribs, but allowed to move about the home using whatever means were available to them commensurate with their stage of development.

Ainsworth (1967), in testing the Geber hypothesis found the same basic pattern among a different group of African neonates. From her observations, urban children whose parents followed European child rearing patterns did not demonstrate early sensorimotor development. These babies appeared to develop similar to infants of their parents' European colleagues and neighbors. Geber and Ainsworth suggest that an appropritate interacting environment is crucial to the continuity of high levels of sensorimotor growth among African infants. The absence of this sort of an environment will cause decline among rural children and a leveling off to European norms by some urban African children.

Differences in sensorimotor development were also found to exist between American black infants and their white counterparts. Nancy Bayley (1965), in making a comparison of mental and motoric test scores between black, white and Puerto Rican babies found no significant group differences in mental test scores. The black babies, however, scored higher than the Puerto Rican and white babies on the motor scale.

Superior motor development was observed in American black infants by Pasaminick (1946) to exist through the age of 24 months. He also reported that black and white infants compared equally in other areas of behavioral development. Similar early development was observed among black babies of Jamaican West Indian parents. Curti and others (1935), reported that these infants surpassed American white infants in reaching certain "milestones" like creeping, standing and walking.

Williams and Scott (1953) in comparing 104 black infants from moderate income families, with 50 black infants from low income families, found significant differences between the two groups in motor development. Infants from the low SES families showed a more advanced motor development than those from higher income families.

Child rearing practices in our country have varied somewhat over the years, having been influenced primarily by middle class norms. Trends which have been known to affect parenting styles have been introduced by child rearing professionals who are read and respected by members of this socioeconomic group. Lower socioeconomic families who are striving for higher status readily adopt attributes which they identify as appropriate to the group(s) above them. Lower socioeconomic people are willing to acquire many such attributes to remove the barriers between themselves and acceptance into the middle class. There are also many things they are willing to forego in order that they might better resemble the more respected middle class.

The most devastating consequence of this is that black parents who are fearful that their active children will not be able to assimilate into a society that they themselves have not been able to assimilate into, will suppress their child's natural activeness to conform to expected institutional behavior norms.

Black mothers ought to be encouraged to play with their babies and share in the enjoyment of active, frequent eye contact, and exciting periods of child rearing. They need to be encouraged to interact with their infant's motor excitement and support their natural capabilities. The mother's reciprocity is vital to a sustained growth environment for their baby because of what appears to be cultural expectations. The infant's rapid buildup early in life can be expected to diminish if through adaptational stress, black parents are forced to bring their family personalities into compliance with the dominant white culture.

The second display along the life span seems to surface during the period from preschool to 3rd grade.

Teacher observations and my own experience provide enough reason to believe that black children in the United States enter school for the first time with a great deal of enthusiasm and positive spirit. From the first day of school to the point where they reach third grade, there is a general upswing in their academic achievement. From about the third grade through the upper grades there is a steady decline in group measured capabilities of black children to do school work.

This decline is more consistent among groups of black children in the South than in the North. Why does this differentiation prevail? I suspect that one possible cause is the general restraint that the southern classroom atmosphere might impose upon children. During normal times these classrooms promote an atmosphere that is somewhere between the northern early childhood, and secondary school environment. That is, not as free and open as the lower grades of northern schools, but not as controlled and traditional as their upper grades either.

Teaching strategies and the delivery of basic education in our country is generally stratified according to teacher training modes. Early childhood teachers grades (K-3), seem to receive deeper and more concentrated training than do elementary grades (K-6) and secondary education grades (7-12) teachers. Early childhood education has been a strong movement in our country for some time and has received greater attention from parents than any other aspect of public schooling.

It is also true that over the years the general public has paid more attention to kindergarten, preschool, and nursery than any other single aspect of pre-college education and has had more written for them on the subject. The Early Childhood Movement has probably done a great deal to expose children to a proper mix of affective and cognitive education.

There is also a higher degree of socialization and teacher-child interaction in the early childhood grades than in the others. Nurturing is a major force in the learning environment. It is within this highly socialized environment of this display period that black children seem to progress at a regular rate of learning. It is important to note here that once out of the early childhood sphere of influence, there appears to be a steady decline in academic achievement among black children.

Docile management and demands for quietude produce sterile classrooms where many black children, mostly males, disengage from the mainstream of class discussions and academic assignments. Teachers become resentful when students balk at "school work". A troubled teacher-pupil relationship is the outcome. I am suggesting that initially, these children's use of energy in this way is not intended to be chaotic or disruptive but strategic to their style of learning. School designed patterns of knowledge delivery need to expand the number of ways that knowledge can properly be disseminated by the educator, and received and synthesized by the learner.

The Children's Defense Fund, a project of the Washington Research Project, compiled statistics directly related to this subject. They reported last year that more than one million children were suspended from school one or more times during the 1972-73 academic year. More than 63% of the suspensions were for minor offenses such as cutting into the lunch line, smoking, truancy and similar acts. In those districts from which their statistics were derived, one out of every 24 students was suspended. For black secondary school children, the suspension rate was one out of every eight.

The final display period that I wish to bring to your attention is a common occurence of national proportions. A casual observation of basketball and football would reveal at the top a large percentage of black athletes far in excess of their representation in the general population.

It is also true that black athletes have transformed professional basketball into a fast, rocketing, active game to fit their own style of athletic encounter. This contrasts sharply with the casual manner of the white dominated game of 15 years ago. The football positions that require alert, immediate responses to the unfolding terraine while running, twisting, and turning, are also dominated by black athletes.

Top performance in either of these sports require high levels of cognitive and physical output--simultaneously. The individual player must process a vast amount of information in an extremely short span of time, then transform that information into behavior most suitable for the constantly changing and unfolding terrain of activity. This displays a compatible interaction between cognitive (information processing), and the motoric (physical output) domains--with circular reinforcement from one domain to the other.

This active stream of cognition has not been fully tapped by education planners. In fact some school counselors and parents have discouraged some students from participating in sports when these students demonstrated an above average capability to do school work. It is also true that they encouraged certain other students to enroll in non-serious courses, suggested that this is necessary for a successful sports career. This in part makes school athletic teams havens for some students who can not do well academically, but also many others who are brainwashed into believing that their talent in sports automatically excludes them from academia.

Many implications for social change can emerge from the theory of group differentiated sensorimotor development. To name a few:

1. Parenting. Media programs could be designed to teach black parents that their child's activeness is normal; and as the child responds they should reciprocate and not suppress the child's natural motoric interactions.
2. Schooling. Teacher training, and school administration could be informed of this differentiation emerging and design teaching strategies and environments to be compatible with the child's need.

3. Therapy. Diagnosis and treatment of hyperactive children, and the general use of medication to modify children's behavior should be re-examined since treatment is administered on the basis of the child's motoric activity level.

4. Space. Attention should be directed to the design of classroom area, and placement of--and types of furniture--design of activity space and free space, and the allocation of time to be spent in these areas.

5. Natural groupings. It appears that white females are the least active when compared to black females and all males. The white female's self-selection for peer group activity may not be sexist or racist when they select each other as group partners in school and play activities. The same could be said for black and white male counterparts. During natural selections among stranger groups, white females are least likely to cross the color line.

6. In very fundamental ways, teachers at all levels need to be able to dip into the learners stream of cognition without diverting it or damming it up.